CASE STUDY PREVIEW

People Operations at Mozilla Corporation:
Scaling a Peer-to-Peer Global Community

Homa Bahrami
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In April 2013, Debbie Cohen, Vice President and Chief of People at Mozilla Corporation, sat at her cubicle space at the Mozilla headquarters in Mountain View, California, reflecting on her brief but busy two-year tenure at Mozilla (often called “The Mozilla Project” or simply “The Project”). She was preparing to meet with CEO Gary Kovacs to discuss the next phase of People efforts at Mozilla.

She marveled at what the mission-based open source organization had achieved in just 15 years. Mozilla had shown that valuable and competitive products could be produced as open source software by a small number of employees who were globally distributed in more than 20 countries, along with millions of global volunteers (called “contributors”) who built, tested, promoted, and supported Mozilla’s products on their own time—all together referred to as “Mozillians”.

By the end of 2011, Mozilla had revenues of $163 million, up 33 percent from $123 million in 2010. And by 2013, Mozilla had nine physical offices in Mountain View, San Francisco, London, Paris, Auckland, Beijing, Tokyo, Vancouver, and Toronto, along with several internet-related products such as Firefox (free internet browser), Firefox OS (an open operating system for mobile devices), Marketplace (a creation and distribution platform for apps), Persona (a decentralized and secure authentication system for the web), Thunderbird (a free, open source, cross-platform e-mail and news client), and Webmaker (tools and education to help people move from using the web to making the web).

In fact, Firefox, Mozilla’s flagship product had over 20 percent of worldwide usage share of web browsers (around 450 million users), making it one of the top-used web browsers around the world.2 Since its founding, Firefox has continued to garner praise from users and developers alike, while gradually stealing market share

1 Open source meant that anyone could use the software, access the code, and modify, improve, and redistribute the modified software.
away from Microsoft’s Internet Explorer and holding its own against Google’s heavily-marketed Chrome which launched in 2008. By 2013, Mozilla had developed Firefox OS, Firefox for Windows, Mac and Linux, and Firefox for Android as well.

By the time Cohen arrived in April 2011, the organization had grown significantly. In fact, that year, Mozilla doubled in size in terms of paid staff from 257 to 537 employees. By 2013, that number had jumped to nearly 1,000. And by then, Cohen had not only developed an innovative, yet tailored people strategy for Mozilla, but also implemented a series of people initiatives related to compensation, onboarding, and development.

Chris Beard, Chief Marketing Officer reflected: “Mozilla started out as this one bedroom house and the opportunity and our family started growing and we just kept on adding rooms. Some things like plumbing or electrical didn’t work right and the foundation wasn’t strong enough to support a second or third story that we started to envision. Debbie came in and put in place a much stronger, solid foundation with a lot of opportunity to grow, and developed the plan on how to scale it—how to bring people in, orient them, get them effective faster, and unlock their potential.”

As Cohen prepared for her meeting with Kovacs, she reflected on her hectic two years working at such a unique and “cultish” organization. She wondered how the People function would continue to support and scale a constantly growing and changing Mozilla, while maintaining and improving the quality of Mozilla’s team and products, remaining competitive in the marketplace, and most importantly, staying true to Mozilla’s core values and mission.

History: Netscape Roots

Mozilla’s history began on February 23, 1998, when Netscape Communications (who launched the Netscape Navigator web browser in 1994) created a project called Mozilla (which was the original code name of the Netscape Navigator browser or an abbreviation of “Mosaic Killer”). Netscape created the Mozilla Project to coordinate the development of the Mozilla Application Suite, the open source version of Netscape’s internet software, Netscape Communicator. This act enabled anyone to discuss, test, fix, and add to the program.

The intent of the Mozilla Project was to create a global open community of internet programmers to fuel innovation in the browser market. According to Mozilla’s website in 2013: “Mozilla’s vision of the internet is a place where anyone can access information, a place where everyone can hack and tinker; one that has openness, freedom and transparency; where users have control over their personal data and where all minds have the freedom to create and to consume without walls or tight restrictions.… Mozilla is mobilized to ensure the protection of the Web and to empower tomorrow’s webmakers and Web users. Today, Mozilla is growing—with more employees, contributors, products, and locations—to ensure that the Web remains an open, vibrant ecosystem. Because the Web is the platform for building the world we want.”

Within a year of Mozilla’s birth, contributors such as volunteer coders, testers, community builders, marketers, teachers, and evangelizers were actively engaged in the creation of features and new functionality, along with new tools and even new browsers. They lived all over the world and some of the fastest growing communities were in places such as the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

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3 Netscape was the first commercially successful graphical browser, working on all operating systems such as Apple, Microsoft, etc.
4 Mosaic was the first popular web browser in 1993.
5 Netscape went public in 1995 but shortly thereafter, was dominated by Microsoft who had introduced its own browser, Internet Explorer for free and bundled into its Windows operating system. Thus in January 1998, Netscape offered Navigator for free.
In 1998, AOL purchased Netscape, continuing to run Netscape and invest in Mozilla, but by late 2001, AOL began reducing Mozilla’s paid staff to focus on other projects. In 2002, Mozilla launched Mozilla 1.0 or a suite of products called the Mozilla Application Suite that included improvements to the browser, an email client, and other applications included in the suite, but they had difficulty garnering users who were still mostly using Microsoft’s Internet Explorer. Mozilla 1.0 only acquired around one to two million users.

Around this time, some Mozillians started a separate project called Phoenix, of which the goal was to build a standalone web browser to compete directly with Internet Explorer. But because a company named Phoenix Technologies had developed their own open-source browser and owned the trademark for the name, Mozilla renamed the project Firebird.

On April 3, 2003, Mozilla announced the plan to shift focus from the Mozilla Suite to independent applications for each function (Firebird for the web browser and Thunderbird for email). Originally, Mozilla was created to be a technology provider for companies (such as Netscape) to battle against Internet Explorer that Microsoft was giving away for free. However plans changed as AOL ended support for the Mozilla Project in 2003. As a result, the Mozilla Foundation, an independent nonprofit organization, was launched to focus on its own projects based on Mozilla’s technology platform.

As Mozilla prepared for its browser’s public release, the team discovered that an open source relational database project also had the same name of Firebird. For the last time, on February 2004, the browser’s name was changed to Firefox after the Asian red panda.

Firefox 1.0 was released in the fall of 2004 for the Mac, Windows, and Linux, in around 12 languages. Within a year, the browser became a great success, downloaded over 100 million times. In fact, it only took five days for Firefox to pass the one million download mark and one month to reach the 10 million mark. Within 16 months, Firefox 1.0 had captured 10 percent of the worldwide browser market. Since then, Mozilla has continuously released new versions with new features such as malware and phishing protection, private browsing, and HTML5 support.

The appeal of Firefox was that it downloaded web pages more rapidly compared to other browsers. Firefox also gained a reputation for being more secure from viruses that could attack a user’s computer. And many liked using Firefox due to its open mission.

Firefox generated revenue from browser-based search through major search partners such as Google and Yahoo, as well as corporate donations and grants. As a result of revenue generation, in 2005, the Mozilla Foundation created a wholly-owned taxable subsidiary called the Mozilla Corporation. The Foundation owned the intellectual property and the Corporation focused on building Firefox and other products. By then, there were 39 employees, with three of those working at the Foundation.

By 2008, Firefox reached 20 percent worldwide market share and 25 percent by 2009, its five-year anniversary (in the meantime, Microsoft’s Internet Explorer had decreased from 70.5 percent in 2008 to 63.3 percent in 2009). By then, Firefox was available in more than 70 languages with much usage outside of North America (with Europe at 34 percent).

By December 2012, Firefox was one of the top three browsers, along with Internet Explorer and Google’s Chrome. According to Net Market Share, Explorer was first with 55 percent, with Firefox leading Chrome 20 to 18 percent. However, StatCounter estimated Chrome to be the top browser at 36 percent and Explorer to be second at 31 percent, and Firefox at 22 percent. Ultimately, they were measuring different things—Net Market Share focused on unique visitors’ web browser hits, while StatCounter focused on raw browser hits.

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7 Hoyt, Sutton, and Rao, op. cit., p. 5.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
A Humanity-Based Philosophy

Cohen arrived at Mozilla armed with her decades of training in child and human development, having started her career in early education at Stanford University where she had spent her time thinking deeply about her impact on small children and their families, as well as on people interactions and influence.

Later, she worked at the Department of the Interior developing an early childhood program. “I further developed and refined my thinking about human potential from its earliest stages,” she said. “We created environments for learning based on our belief that everyone is self-motivated to move and act in the world in ways that give them meaning, and our jobs were to facilitate and encourage that initiative, not get in the way…. And then I became more and more interested in work environments for adults.”

Cohen’s professional journey led her to human resources, often consulting to organizations. She had entered the field because she felt that traditional HR approaches and processes didn’t add enough value to organizations. She began working at companies such as Time Warner and Razorfish. “I became interested in how to create an environment that allows for one’s humanity to be present,” she said. “And then I began doing work at Mozilla, in particular, looking at how we unlock what is possible for individuals and what could happen for an organization where we don’t have unnecessary boxes around people.”

She emphasized: “I wanted to make sure that we had humanity in the workplace, especially in a technology organization where people might not be as socially comfortable interacting face-to-face. I wanted to help create an organization that honored the humanity of each person and the potential that we each have. And to create an environment where people feel like they are championed to bring their best full self to the organization.”

The State of Mozilla

Mozilla was unlike many other organizations because of its open source environment and its commitment to open community participation. In fact, 30 to 40 percent of its code was created by contributors. Kovacs said: “There’s a fundamental assumption that a workforce is a staff working for a company. Here at Mozilla, our talent base is a diverse collection of paid staff and volunteers contributing towards a common objective.”

Kovacs also said that a fundamental assumption at most other organizations was that contribution to an organization started and stopped based on a traditional employment equation. “I hire you, and your contribution starts and when you leave, are fired, or laid off, your contribution stops. That assumption doesn’t hold true at Mozilla,” he said. “Many of our paid staff started by volunteering, take a paid position, and then might decide to volunteer again after that. That took me a while to get used to. I later began to understand that just the nature of their relationship with Mozilla had changed, not whether they were still committed and would continue to contribute.”

Because of these unique assumptions about Mozilla’s talent base, Cohen didn’t have the typical HR role where she was tasked to structure HR for a staff that was compensated and rewarded by an organization. Instead, “she has to build a community and culture from the outside in,” said Kovacs. “That’s very different from a traditional culture of, ‘here’s who we are, and project that out.’”

When Cohen arrived, Mozilla was still at an early developmental stage in terms of HR (named the “People organization” by Kovacs). Mozilla was one fifth the size as it was by 2013 in terms of paid staff and one quarter the size in terms of contributors. Patrick Finch, the Director of Product Marketing Strategy who was based in Sweden and who managed people all over the world in places like Vancouver, Seattle, and Berlin, said: “When I joined Mozilla in 2008, there were only 100 employees and we knew everyone and most communication happened asynchronously.”
Very little traditional HR structures and processes existed at that time. Cohen said: “Moreover, there were people at Mozilla that didn’t believe that they needed anything. There was a very casual and personal feel to the organization.” She added: “We had a rudimentary structure in place that included recruiting and some basic operations so people could get paid, but we didn’t have people who were HR specialists, although they were well-intended and smart people. When you start scaling for the long-term, you have to do things differently. This is typical for a company that is coming out of its startup phase.”

Cohen’s overall strategy was to put into place, “infrastructure” that allowed the organization to grow and scale without a lot of “false starts”. However, she added: “The tension was, how do you stay true to your roots, who you want to be in the world, and what you stand for? What I found upon arrival was a tendency to put in a more traditional hierarchical structure. You could feel the tension within the Project. Additionally, we were growing and people were very suspicious of the People team, believing we would function like a more traditional HR group, like the police, and focus on compliance, control, and process. Words like ‘process’ made people very nervous and uncomfortable.”

Mozilla was also comprised mostly of technology areas and engineering employees. Because of the predominance of engineering employees, Cohen said engineers tended to be a part of a “club” and those entering the organization as non-technologists were “alien” to people there. “The way we thought, our language, and our interactions were foreign to them,” said Cohen.

Organizationally, Mozilla’s geo-distributed structure also led to a unique set of challenges and opportunities, according to Beard: “Although there is likely an organizational overhead cost to being a distributed organization and it makes it harder for us to respond holistically, once we turn, we’re able to bring a lot more force in a distributed way to our efforts.” Beard provided the example of marketing campaigns: “We have hundreds and thousands of people doing different marketing campaigns around the world in a local way and sharing back the results compared to our competitors who are structured more traditionally. So we have a massive incubator and when it’s working, we can put some juice behind it and scale it.”

From a business perspective, the organization was buzzing from the recent launch of Firefox 4, its first re-launch of Firefox in over two years. “Change was happening everywhere,” said Cohen. “We were working to stay relevant as a product and signaling the shift into the mobile ecosystem. And we were growing quickly which began to strain the peer-to-peer relationships between our contributors and our paid staff. In our organization, credibility is gained by solving someone’s problem. I knew I had to move quickly for the People function to gain credibility.”

**The First Year: “Assess, Build, Then Execute”**

Even though Cohen knew that there were “big needs” such as infrastructures for compensation, she eased her way into those issues by first trying to “really understand” what the business was, how it worked, how it was organized, what mattered to the organization, and how people worked...